

The Heron and the Crane

YURI NORSTEIN

1974

For his third film as director, Yuri Norstein chose a Russian folktale. *The Heron and the Crane*, a tale of indecision, rejection and self destruction seems a parable, a warning for children. It is also a story that most adults have seen play out in their own lives. The beautiful Heron rejects the Crane's proposal, sparking a continual to and fro of rejection, regret and possible reconciliation. In Norstein's depiction, the Heron takes on a vaudeville aesthetic, complete with long necklace of beads and a shawl. The Crane is a tall, dashing figure who flings his blue jacket over his shoulder. Released in 1974, a year before the iconic *Hedgehog in the Fog*, it is possible to see Norstein's distinctive style evolving in this wonderful, whimsical work.

Norstein painstakingly uses a painting on glass technique, which articulates flat cut-out figures in stop motion. This is in opposition to the animation standards set by Disney, who had legions of artists working on cel animation. The success of Disney and their films quickly led to cel animation becoming the commercial expectation worldwide. However, in the Soviet Union animation was less pressured by commercial concerns. Animators were paid a state salary and were, by and large, more free to experiment with technique. Norstein took the painting on glass technique and did so. Using multiple planes of glass he was able to create a smoothness and sense of depth. This is apparent for the first time in *The Heron and the Crane*. At moments, the characters traverse back and forth over the murky, foggy marsh. The rain falls, seemingly in front of the characters who look submerged in its midst, far away from the camera and the audience's perspective. In one stunning moment, the heron crouches in her balcony, her loneliness accentuated by the depth of vision.

Despite its brevity, the artistic style is incredibly varied. The characters inhabit a dilapidated place, that suggests a previous grandeur. Ivy grows around cracked marble columns. The marshes themselves are painted in grey, with brown and green undertones. It is simultaneously beautiful, lush and bleak. This is a perfect setting for a story of regret. The faded regalia of their homes parallel their heightened sense of selves. But this setting is interposed with

drastically different aesthetics. Their dreamscapes are bright and vibrantly coloured.

When the Crane first goes to propose to the Heron, he arrives flying, emblazoned against a sea of blue, as birds throw bouquets into the air below him. When he arrives, he re-enters the greying landscape in which they truly live. Similarly, when the Heron first decides to tell the Crane she will marry him, in her imagination they dance together through lush fields of dark green to the score of a romantic waltz. It is a far cry from the greying green of their actual home. Again, when she tells the Crane that she wants to marry him and he rejects her, the camera jumps to the Crane washing his clothes in a grey fountain with his back turned. It is a visually stunning spectacle, one in which dreams and reality are beautifully and heartbreakingly counterposed. The fog, which would soon make Norstein so famous, features heavily in this work. In the last minute of the film, the characters are encapsulated in the fog, once again seemingly from afar. Only their silhouettes are visible. We see the shape of the Crane approach the Heron through the fog and rain, holding an umbrella over her head. She rejects him once more, he gives her the umbrella before walking off and she sadly turns around. It is a perfect visual representation of pride and self destruction.

Ultimately, the most stunning motif and an incredible feat of animation is the fireworks display. The Heron and Crane remain in their homes and the fireworks break over them, human life once again intruding into their world. They watch the fireworks separately, but Norstein brings them together as light washes over their individual figures, changing their colours in quick succession. In a moment of celebration they are alone in their mutual destruction. The music, composed by Michael Meyerovich, adds meaning. It swells ironically over their perpetual game, adding a hint of humour to the self aware anti-climax. At the end of the film, Norstein tells us that it goes 'back and forth like this forever'. Fundamentally, he has taken a popular fairytale, one which most Russians would be familiar with, and created a visual resonance imbued with his characteristic whimsy and melancholy.